

A blended family builds a fresh start on Log Hill Mesa

Sometimes, the land just seems to open up and say what it wants.

That's how it was when Brian Wallin and Jill Jordan decided to make a new life together, and bought a wild, undeveloped parcel of almost-heaven on Log Hill, a sprawling mesa overlooking the town of Ridgway in southwestern Colorado.

Wooded with piñon juniper and kerchiefed with sky, the property offered perfectly calibrated views of the Sneffels Range to the south, the Cimarron Range to the east-southeast, and in between, the siren song of the Uncompahgre Valley and the pyramid of Mt. Abram.

The first time Wallin and Jordan went up to the property together, they knew immediately where their future home would go. Apart from the Divide Ranch Golf Club, much of Log Hill Mesa is forested. But their property boasted a rare meadow, and within that meadow,

there was a weird, rocky, barren spot, just waiting for someone to come along and build a house on it.

"We stood on this spot and said, this is it. It's the point where you can see the majority of the Sneffels range and still have the Cimarron view," Wallin said.

"It's the sweet spot," Jordan agreed.

The only question was, what kind of house did they want to build?

THE 'BRADY BUNCH'

There were a few set parameters. The house would have to comfortably accommodate their new blended family of four teenagers (Emma and Keegan, both rising seniors at Ridgway Secondary School, and Eleni and Anikah, who are both going into 9th grade). It would also need to be able to evolve into a comfortable and cozy abode for just the two of them in a few short years when the kids graduated from high school and — in theory, at least — moved out.

Wallin and Jordan, both in their 40s, started looking at house designs online for inspiration. Wallin, a Denver native who traces his family roots back to a farm in Iowa, liked the idea of a rustic, roomy old farmhouse. Jordan, who grew up in Boulder, had an affinity for tiny homes, and preferred the modern industrial aesthetic. She wasn't looking for a nest to fuss with for the rest of her life, and she didn't want a house that she would have to babysit forever.

"I wanted it smaller, so we can go on more vacations," she said with a laugh.

By focusing on how they wanted their new home to feel and function versus how they wanted it to look, they soon discovered that their tastes were actually more closely aligned than they thought.

"Okay," said Wallin, "you can have a small house, if I can have a big barn."

"Deal," Jordan said.

In those early, dreaming stages, "We would come up with a new house plan every day," Wallin said. "It got to the



Chris Sjoden of Sjoden Wood Designs in Montrose was the lead builder on the project. The entire house and barn were completed in about nine months.

BY SAMANTHA TISDEL WRIGHT

PHOTOS BY ALEC JACOBSON

point where the kids would joke, ‘What’s the plan today?’ We started naming them the Thursday house plan, the Friday house plan....”

Finally, on Pinterest, they found a design for a nice-looking guesthouse in Napa Valley, Calif. that they both loved. Modern and compact, open and airy, the home’s distinguishing feature was a truss system within a raised section of roof and windows called a clerestory, which channeled light and warmth into the main living area.

Wallin and Jordan realized that they would require assistance adapting this home’s design in order to meet their own needs, so they reached out to their friend, draftsman and designer Greg Hunter, for help.

THE MAN WITH THE PLAN

An easy-going, pony-tailed Ridgway local with a ready laugh and an artist’s soul, Hunter can trace his own family

roots all the way back to the 800-year-old family manor of the Hunter Clan — the oldest, continuously occupied family house in Scotland. He was delighted to help Wallin and Jordan create a new little family manor of their own, up on Log Hill Mesa.

Hunter worked as a fine jeweler in LA before moving to the San Juans in the 1990s. “I’ve seen a diamond bigger than a nickel,” he said. When he moved to Ridgway, no one could afford expensive jewelry so he started building houses.

“I like making things with my hands,” he explained. The two endeavors have more in common than you would think, especially when it comes to finish work.

Hunter did all of the interior trim at the historic Beaumont Hotel’s restoration in Ouray in the early 2000s. “It was one of the most fun jobs I ever did, tearing open walls and finding places that hadn’t been touched in 100 years,” he said. “For four years, I had a blast dressing that old lady up.”

Hunter had started drafting in high school. He was a sketch artist for years as well — pixelated desert landscapes, mostly. Together with Jordan (who has been his close friend since their kids were little) he recently explored the possibility of launching a tiny home production company, but ultimately determined that it would not be profitable.

Instead, over the past several years, Hunter has carved out a niche working with clients who have a clear idea of what they want in their home’s design, and would prefer to skip the expense of having to hire an architect. (Ridgway engineer Matt Hepp reviews and approves Hunter’s engineering drawings and designs.)

“I can perform everything an architect would for a third of the cost,” Hunter said. “The other advantage I have is that I have actually built a lot of stuff. I like to think of design projects from that standpoint of ‘How do you put it together?’”

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SMALL HOUSE, Big Love

The house is oriented to have perfectly calibrated views of the Sneffels and Cimarron mountain ranges. Wallin created a registered brand and christened their property the Bar JB Ranch, for Jill and Brian.



"I think of every building I do as (both) a sculpture that people live inside of, and a machine."

Hunter's background in geology (his major in college) comes in handy when he's doing site assessments and foundation work.

"It's a fun combo," Hunter said. "I think of every building I do as (both) a sculpture that people live inside of, and a machine. They meld together in my mind. They have got to perform for people. They have got to be beautiful and aesthetically pleasing, and enjoyable, and efficient, because people are going to live in that house for years and years."

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Hunter studied the roof structure of the Napa Valley house that Wallin and Jordan had selected on Pinterest. It had a complicated truss system with big, square bolted beams — and no insulation to speak of.

Then he called his friends in for a chat.

"Um," he said, in his kindest, gentlest, breaking-bad-news-to-your-besties-sort-of-voice, "this is going to be *tricky* because, you know, in *Napa Valley*... there are no *snow load* issues...and the insulation needs are much different *there* than they are *here*..."

But Wallin and Jordan had their hearts set on the design, so Hunter agreed to take on the challenge of figuring out a way to create a similar roof system that would actually work in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado.

Hunter's mantra throughout the design process was to keep it simple. Having been a homebuilder for 20-plus years, he understands that when the cost of a project escalates, it becomes more complicated.

"When I design a house, I am always asking, 'What can I create that can be assembled by the framing crew on site?'" he explained.

He jettisoned a couple of early sketches for a 25-foot truss span that would have required having an on-site welder, and

The house's signature feature is a cleverly designed truss system contained within a raised section of roof and windows called a clerestory, channeling light and warmth into the main living area.

(Photo by Samantha Tisdell Wright)

created an ingenious new truss design of steel rods threaded with steel bars that could be bolted together by the framing crew and simply craned into place on top of the standard frame construction.

Working like a police sketch artist with constant feedback from Jordan and Wallin, he then fleshed out the design work for the rest of the house — stretching the height of the walls up to 12 feet throughout the structure, exchanging windows along the south side for a dramatic floor-to-ceiling wall of glass to maximize views, adding a couple of extra bedrooms for the kids, and making the signature clerestory feature over the main living area a bit taller, to bring in more light.

He ended up with a design for a petite, airy 1,400 square-foot jewel box of a house that his clients adored.

But before construction could get underway, they had to bring water and power to the property. This was no small feat, since the parcel sits atop a layer of Dakota sandstone, the 104-million-year-old geologic formation laid down by an ancient inland sea that forms the cap rock of all the low mesas in the area.

"They had to jackhammer through it," Hunter said. "It was insane."

Once that mission was accomplished, the new house rose up from its bedrock foundation with almost preternatural speed.

BUILDING A BARN

Before the house, there was the barn.

Wallin had always wanted a barn. Not for horses, but for *stuff*: His Cross-Fit gym equipment; his golf clubs; his riding lawnmower. The usual. Now, he had the land to put it on, *and* Jordan's blessing to put it there. So as their plans for the house were still coming together, Wallin went ahead and ordered a roomy "kit" barn from a company called Sand Creek Post and Beam, complete with a little loft.

The pre-cut lumber for the barn arrived like a build-your-own-Christmas-present in December 2017, about a month before they broke ground on the house.

Being a kit barn, it went up fast. Which was a good thing, because the 4,000-square-foot house the family had been renting unexpectedly sold four months before their new house was ready to move into.

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Top: A roomy kit barn from Sand Creek Post and Beam, complete with a little loft apartment, provided temporary living quarters for the family while the house was still under construction.

Bottom: Wallin enjoys the view from his loft office in the main house.

(Photos by Samantha Tisdal Wright)



The construction crew took a break from working on the house to convert the barn's loft into a tiny, loft apartment that became the family's temporary home. They squeezed into the 400-square-foot apartment for the summer, and watched their new house continue to go up, bit by bit.

"Having us on site helped smooth the process out a lot," said Brian — and likely added to the contractors' sense of urgency to get the job done on time, and on budget.

The mild non-winter of 2017-18 also played a part in the speedy construction of their new house. "I kept thinking, 'It's gonna snow here at some point,'" Wallin recalled. "But weeks would go by, with no snow. We were extremely lucky. We picked a good drought year. It was a good year to build stuff."

That fall, they moved out of their tiny loft apartment, and into their new home,

Center: House designer Greg Hunter chats with Wallin while Jordan gives one of the family's four kitties a cuddle in the kitchen. The custom kitchen island features a rolled steel countertop and barnwood accents. (Photo by Samantha Tisdell Wright)



which felt palatial by comparison.

"There was nothing on this property in November of 2017. Then, by September of 2018, it was completely done," Wallin said. "It took less than a year to complete both structures."

BABY'S BATHTUB

Looking back on the building process, everything came together remarkably well. But there was some last-minute drama involving the master bathroom, as Jordan recalled.

"I wanted a bathtub really badly and Brian convinced me that I didn't need one, and then after the fourth revision of the house, I realized I couldn't live without it," she explained. By that time, the crew had already poured the slab floor and the plumber was wondering where to put the pipes in — which would literally set in concrete the bathroom's layout.

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Hunter redesigned the master bathroom at the last minute to incorporate a bathtub, at Jordan's request.

The open floor plan of the main living area encourages the family to spend time together. Aaron Dick did the tile work throughout the house.



That's when Jordan finally decided to speak up: "No, no, no. Wait!"

Over the course of about eight very hectic hours, starting that afternoon and going late into the night, Jordan and Hunter went back and forth, with PDFs and scans and emails and phone calls and texts, trying to squeeze a last-minute bathtub into the master bathroom's floor plan.

"It was this intense design thing where we altered the whole layout of this bathroom in one night," Hunter said. "I handed the new design back to them and the plumber went in the next day and did it," bathtub and all.

"It got interesting," Jordan sighed. "But it turned out to be one of my favorite rooms in the house."

The finished bathroom is sparkling and ultra modern, all clean lines and glass and metal, with a walk-in shower, a tub for Jordan, and a giant red decorative heart hanging on the wall — a silent reminder, perhaps, to speak from the heart and express your needs in the moment instead of waiting until it's too late.

NO WASTED SPACE

Wallin and Jordan and the kids have been living in their new house now for about nine months, and fall in love with it a little bit more every day. It is a house that allows each of its inhabitants plenty of space, while also fostering togetherness.

In the morning, sunlight pours in through the kitchen windows, illuminating the house — and everything within it — in golden light. "I still find myself waking up in the morning and looking at the view," Wallin said. "I try not to take it for granted. We get that every day. It's pretty amazing."

The house looks a little bit like an old barn that has been restored, thanks to the trusses and clerestory, the rustic barnwood accents, the exposed ceiling beams sprayed with a fertilizer mixture that instantly watermarked and weathered the wood.

"And yet it's so cool and modern," Jordan said, looking appreciatively around her new home.

Custom-steel design touches assert themselves throughout, from an industrial-strength front door and countertops to a fabricated ladder with railings and heavy-duty safety treads, leading to a

Taking inspiration from “tiny home” designs, the kitchen has just enough open cabinet space for everyday items. At far left, the coffee station is positioned in the corridor just footsteps from the master bedroom.

small loft space where Wallin has set up a home office.

A brick accent wall in the hallway to the master bedroom adds both warmth and a retro-industrial vibe. The clerestory windows channel sunlight from above, while the wall of glass on the south side of the house amplifies the many moods of mountains and the sky.

Jordan, who works remotely for a startup company in Manhattan (often from her “home office” on the patio outside), enjoys the changing quality of light that animates the house from day to day and season to season. In the winter, passive solar gain keeps things super-cozy. In the summer, when the sun is higher in the sky, the cantilevered porch roof outside will help to deflect the sunlight, so the interior stays nice and cool.

Open cabinets in the kitchen provide just enough storage space for the dishes and glasses that the family uses on a daily basis, all within easy reach. The master bedroom wing beckons just beyond, down a hallway that also hides a pantry behind sliding chalkboard doors.

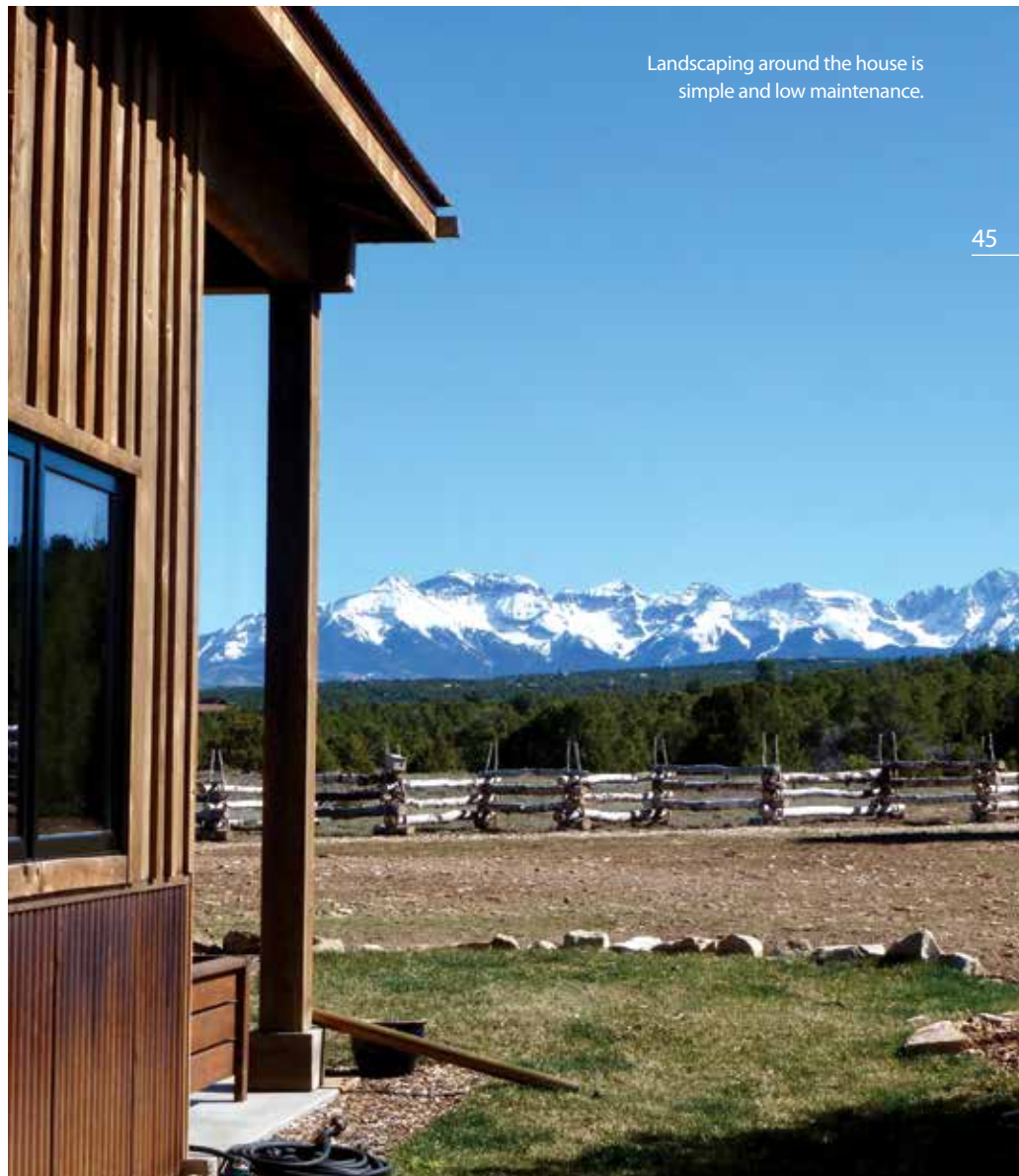
“Having a hallway that is also a pantry is part of that tiny-house thinking — making spaces multifunctional,” Jordan explained. A single, large family portrait hangs in the hall, evoking the Brady Bunch.

The master bedroom is not huge. It is just the right size for the couple’s bed and a few favorite pieces of furniture, with plenty of windows and a private entrance onto the patio where they look forward to whiling away long summer evenings around a custom fire pit that Wallin designed and built himself.

A separate bedroom wing for their two younger teens is positioned on the other side of the house, beyond the entryway and central living area, giving everyone plenty of privacy when they want it. Meanwhile, the loft apartment out in the barn has been transformed into “Teen-Landia,” the place where their two older teens have tiny bedrooms and some much-needed “hang out” space away from the rest of the family.

The house is adorned with artwork by local Ouray County artists Rose Walsh, Jill Ridders and Ann Dettmer. Jordan took charge of selecting the furniture and many of the design finishes, bringing feminine energy to hard, rough spots. Wallin let her lead the way.

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Landscaping around the house is simple and low maintenance.

Jordan and Wallin enjoy spending time on their patio in front of a firepit that Wallin designed and built himself.



The house feels alive with energy. “That was super-important to me,” Jordan said. “I think every square foot of this house gets used, every day.”

“We had this big leather couch we had bought for the house we used to live in, and I wanted to have it in the living room, but Jill thought we need something softer, and in the end, she was right,” he admitted.

(The leather couch found a new home in Teen-Landia.)

“Functionality was huge for both of us,” Jordan said. So, for example, the coffee station is positioned in the corridor just a few footsteps from the master bedroom. “Coffee helps you to function,” she laughed. “You can come out and get your coffee and go back to your room, before interacting with the rest of the world.”

Wallin, who has his own business managing several homeowner associations in the region, is in Telluride or Cornerstone most days of the week, but he enjoys working in his loft office space at home from time to time. It offers a neat perspective on the home they have built together.

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“I make a point to use each restroom every day,” Wallin chimed in. “All 2.5 of them.”

SIX-PACK

Shortly after moving into their new house last fall, the family headed to Second Chance Humane Society to adopt a kitten. They came home with four kittens — one for each kid. The only rule for naming them was that each name had to start with “H”. So they have Hendricks (like the gin), Hashbrown, Hot Potato and Hiyah, to go along with their two dogs, Hank and Hazel.



As dusk falls over Log Hill Mesa, the house becomes a sparkling jewelbox, beckoning its inhabitants with light and warmth.

Over the winter, the kittens grew into cats. They get along great, and so do the kids. “Keegan and Eleni are laid back, and Emma and Anikah keep us in line,” Wallin laughed. “It’s interesting how we all get along. All six of us, two dogs, and four cats.”

They also share their acreage with bears, wild turkeys, deer, elk, coyotes and mountain lions. “We haven’t actually seen the mountain lions yet, but we know they are around, because there are fresh kills everywhere,” Wallin said. “It helps you remember where you are in the food chain.”

Around the perimeter of the house, they have put in a meandering hiking trail through the trees, and a little bit of well-tended lawn — just enough for Wallin to justify keeping his riding lawnmower. The snow has melted, and tender shoots of meadow grass have begun coming up where seed was scattered last fall.

The barn rises out of the landscape nearby like a broad-beamed ship in a sea of piñon juniper, dwarfing their diminutive home.

“It’s funny, we have some friends with smaller children that are still really honest, and they ask, ‘Why do you have such a huge barn and such a small house?’” Jill laughed. “We just tell them, ‘That was our agreement.’”

THE FAMILY BRAND

Before Log Hill Mesa got golf coursed, developed and subdivided, it used to be prime Ouray County ranch land. So Wallin thought it was fitting that the new family home should have its own official brand, Bar JB, for Jill and Brian.

He sketched a design and looked into registering the brand through the Colorado Department of Agriculture’s Branding Office. With over 140 years of ranching history in Colorado, most simple, double-letter brands in the state have long since been snapped up, and are rarely available for purchase again. But against all odds, Bar JB was available, and for a \$200 fee, it became theirs.

Their patio now sports Bar JB Ranch floor mats where cats stretch out for naps in the sun. And for Christmas, the kids can always look forward to getting yet another sweatshirt emblazoned with the family brand. 